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A LABOR OF LOVE: PROGRAMS WORKING TO MAKE FATHERS COUNT

Until recently, Thomas Read thought of himself as nothing more than a small-time Baltimore hustler with a young son that he saw for occasional trips to an arcade.

"My back was against the wall, you know, I was behind the eight-ball and I did whatever to stay alive," the 22-year-old Read said.

Without a high school diploma, Read felt hopeless about finding a job to better support his child and feared that he might end up a stranger to his own son—much as his own father, a stranger he never knew.

"I don't even know the man's hair color," Read said. He was embarrassed that he couldn't show his son Dezmond, now 4, that a real man works for a living.

Through a friend, Read hooked up with a local fatherhood program called the Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development. He started GED classes and joined the group's job training program, called STRIVE.

"They convinced me to keep my spirits up and keep trying," said Read, who now works for Sky Chef, an airline food supplier, and volunteers at the center 25 hours a week. His self-esteem is high and he has worthwhile goals he believes he can achieve. Instead of the arcade, he now takes his son to the library.

"Before I came into the program, I always felt as though a father was needed," Read said. "Being I missed out on that, I now get to relive my childhood all over again through my son. I'm an active father in his life."

LAURA STAFFORD

Thomas Read became an active father in his son's life and gained the self-confidence and training he needed to work toward a better future as a result of his involvement in a fatherhood program run by the Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development in Baltimore.

Evidence from more than three decades of research proves that children are more likely to grow into healthy, mature adults if their fathers are involved in their lives. Across America, fatherhood initiatives are blooming, a trend that has accelerated since the mid-1990s as organizations and foundations have focused more attention on getting fathers involved in their children's lives.

An estimated 23 million American children live in homes without their biological fathers, 20 million of those in single-parent homes. The poverty rate for children whose parents never married is 64 percent, compared to a poverty rate of just 8.4 percent for children in two-parent families.

But clearly, a father's importance goes beyond financial support. Studies show children who grow up without fathers are far more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs, get into trouble with the law, and have sex at a younger age than children whose fathers are involved in their lives.

JOHN GENTRY, JR.

Darnell Griffin, a participant in the Fathers and Families Resource/Research Center in Indianapolis, and his six-year-old twin sons, Dravon and Davon. The program has helped Griffin get the skills and resources he needs to be an effective and productive parent.

"What we talk about is that fathers matter," said Maurice Moore of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Fathers and Families Initiative. "We have learned from the research that kids who have fathers engaged in their lives do better socially, are more healthy emotionally and physically, and do better in school."

Unemployment, underemployment, and disincentives in the welfare and child support systems complicate some men's best efforts to do right by their children. Men who become fathers as teenagers often don't get the support and make the positive connections they need to become committed parents, to the detriment of both father and child. And efforts to hold so-called "deadbeat dads" accountable for child support too often sidestep the ability of fathers to make a living so they can support their kids.

"I hate to say it, but being black and poor—and many of us here come from poverty—we want to change, but there are no opportunities," said 29-year-old Ulysses Snell, a Minneapolis father getting help from a program called Minnesota Early Learning and Development. The program helps fathers overcome troubled pasts—including criminal convictions and owing thousands of dollars in back child support—daunting obstacles that often interfere with a man's ability to be a dad.

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For seven years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been supporting programs that address these issues and underscore and highlight the critical contributions fathers make to their children's lives. The Foundation is part of a burgeoning movement to help "build the field," Moore noted, by encouraging federal, state, and local policymakers to support systems changes that help fathers embrace and fulfill their parenting roles.

Programs that are well connected to a wide-range of social service agencies and have good follow-up work with dads after the formal sessions end generally have the best likelihood of success. "You have to have visionary leadership and staff who are committed," Moore said. "You have to have a mission."

The Johns Hopkins Fatherhood Program works in four sites—Fort Defiance, Puba City, and White River, Arizona, and Gallup, New Mexico—using trained counselors to work one-on-one with young Native American fathers and mothers, whether or not they live together, said Johnathan Begay, the coordinator of the program.

The program works primarily with two tribes, the Navajo Nation and White Mountain Apache Nation. On tribal lands, most young parents live with each other, but each parent gets individual attention from the program.

"Family health educators get the names of couples that have gone to the Indian Health Service for pregnancy counseling and assistance," Begay said. "Moms must be between 14 and 19 and dads must be between 14 and 26. Male counselors meet with the dads each week from the start of the pregnancy until the end of the child's first year."

Some 28 fathers have been involved in the pilot program for the past year, and the organization is gearing up to expand to 120 dads. Although drug abuse still is a major challenge, evaluations conducted every four months show the parents involved have made significant gains in parenting skills and education, Begay said.

In south El Paso, Texas, one of the poorest areas of the country, the Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe is in its third year of an initiative to reconnect fathers to the cultural traditions of the Mexican and indigenous people.

"In our culture and many cultures, many of our males were comfortable just earning the money and letting the wife take care of the family," said La Fe Associate Director Jorge Salazar. "Now, with our knowledge of the importance of both parents participating in a child's early development, we wanted to make sure we were combining that information with cultural traditions."

La Fe—which translates as "the faith"—is not a religious organization, but a multipurpose social service and health organization that helps 20,000 people with an annual budget of about $10 million. The agency's fatherhood initiative, called Hombres 2000, began in 1999 and organized a summit for men in the year 2000. Some 300 fathers are involved in the initiative.

Men are encouraged to come with their pregnant wives and girlfriends to La Fe's health clinic and to come alone with their children for immunizations and well-baby checkups. The program emphasizes that the man carries equal responsibility for the welfare of the baby. "We use terminology with them such as both of them being pregnant and it's not just the woman carrying a baby," Salazar said.

The group also has a new cultural and technology center where dads bring their children to learn new skills—such as the use of computers—just as fathers in ancient times would teach their children to hunt and to defend the village. "The father would be the one to show the child how to hunt, and in today's marketplace, the spear is the computer technology that is needed to get a job," Salazar said.

La Fe also has a program for young men called the Mexican-American Youth Alliance, or MAYA, which helps connect youth to their forebears. "The male movement is not going to be one with very high numbers at the beginning," Salazar said. "We're going against the grain of traditional societal expectations."

The group also holds focus group sessions, called Platicas, in which men talk to each other about mistakes they made in life and how they can get on the right path. The Mexican-American community in El Paso is also battling a breakdown in communication across the generations—grandparents don't speak English and their grandchildren don't speak Spanish. Oral histories and storytelling help bring the generations together, Salazar noted.

The Indianapolis-based Fathers and Families Resource/Research Center was launched in 1993 by the head of the Social Work Department at Wishard Memorial Hospital as a way to combat infant mortality, primarily in the African-American community. At the time, Indianapolis had one of the nation's worst infant mortality rates, said Wallace McLaughlin, the president and chief executive officer of the program.

"This was a way to address teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and many of the other social ills in the community by trying to engage fathers in the lives of their children," McLaughlin said. "The purpose was to help fathers become providers and nurturers and see them as a resource to their families and to their communities."

As an ordained minister and pastor of Imani Community Church in Indianapolis, McLaughlin often deals with the same families that get involved in the fatherhood program. Many of them are struggling to survive day to day, and one more crisis can push them to the brink. "People have to understand the complexities of the challenges of young, fragile families who can barely pull the pieces together," McLaughlin said.

The program, which is primarily voluntary, provides a range of education, job training, job placement, and parenting classes. About 5 percent of its clients are referred by courts and another 5 percent are sent through child support enforcement agencies. McLaughlin estimates that the group has helped about 1,000 men since 1993.

"Too often, foundations, funders, and policymakers want a changed picture in six months or a year," McLaughlin said. "But because of the incipient issues like racism, drug usage, and unemployment, it takes a while for a change to take place."

Some 300 men and their families are now involved in the program. The centerpiece is the Fatherhood Development Workshop, which meets eight times a year for three and a half weeks each time. It helps men who have established paternity to get their GED if needed and to be prepared for job interviews and the workforce.

SUSIE FITZHUGH

Mai-Ka Bui and her father, Phuong Bui, playing a toy xylophone together at their home in Seattle. The family is involved in several programs in White Center, the target neighborhood in the Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative.

For many men who have not been involved in their children's lives until child support enforcement authorities step in, it is too late, noted Greg Bishop, the founder of "Boot Camp for New Dads."

First launched in Irvine, California in 1990, this peer-to-peer mentoring program for fathers has expanded to 127 sites in 37 states and has trained more than 50,000 new dads. "Our premise all along is you want to get guys connected with kids right out of the chute," said Bishop. "Once that baby comes home, opportunity closes, patterns of involvement or non-involvement set in, and men tend to follow the pattern of their own fathers."

But if you connect with fathers when the thrill of parenthood is fresh, it can make all the difference. "Birth is a magical moment for fathers, and men are very receptive at that point," Bishop said.